Erev Rosh Hashana-5778 Rabbi Nina H Mandel

How do you feel?

This is a question I’ve been thinking about a lot lately. It’s one of those questions, like: How are you? How is it going? And What’s new? That often gets asked without the expectation of a genuine response. But I’ve noticed over the last year that the answer to How do you feel IS answered, and usually with something that indicates not a physical update but an emotional one. How do you feel? Tired, despondent, overwhelmed, frightened, disgusted…A range of adjectives that express responses to what has been an emotionally-charged year in our country. Setting the specific issues aside, many of us recognize expressions of divisiveness, anger, hate, and fear are coming at us from all sides.

It’s not that the issues are especially new. Only a few diseases ravaging the most vulnerable have been eradicated over the years. Natural disasters and acts of nature have always managed to prove to human beings that we are not as cunning as we think we are.

The moment the Puritans set foot on this land seeking refuge from religious tyranny, but realizing that they were not alone, our nation has been divided into Us and Them. Those of us with more power and resources are still the ones who make the rules and set the standards for everyone.

And, as the experience of being Jewish in the history of our country teaches, the US have overwhelmingly been of white, Christian European descent, while the Them have been people with darker skin and different religious and cultural traditions. The issues of racism, anti-immigration, and intolerance in all forms may manifest differently now, but they have very deep roots in our history.

Yet, somehow, these not-new issues seem to be weighing more heavily on many of us than ever before. Perhaps it is because we thought some of them were on their way to obscurity, but now we’re finding out they were just under the surface, waiting for the opportunity to emerge. Or maybe we’ve been blind to them, or to their impact, and now, as we are either seeing or being made to see, we don’t know how to process them. So, the question again, How do you feel?

I believe the official diagnosis is: Compassion fatigue. We get to a point where we are overwhelmed by the number of things about which we care deeply. Images on our screens, articles we read, voices we listen to, all demand our attention and we feel moved or obligated to respond. By the time we hit the point of compassion fatigue, we are often unable to respond at all.

So let me reframe the question: How do you feel? And how does your approach to feeling affect your actions? Do your emotions come directly from your gut, spurring you into action immediately? Are they coming from your heart, in a way that makes them so overwhelming that they flood you in love or sadness, or both? Or are you a logic person, so you feel first with your mind, examining and evaluating before responding.

Of course it’s all a trick question. In the end, we want to be able to get to a place of balance with our feelings. One where we aren’t denying or suppressing them, but where we also are not overwhelmed. Tonight, and tomorrow, I am going to talk about the tools Jewish tradition offers to achieve that balance. We have a tendency to think of our lives in a compartmentalized way: this is work, this is home, this is Jewish, this is political, this is medical…when we probably all know that each area affects the other.

I may have told this story before, but it still works. Back in 1995, before the thought of becoming a rabbi had ever crossed my mind, and when I just started being involved in a Jewish community since, probably, 1980, I went to a weekend-long program at a Jewish retreat center. For the first time in my adult life (I was about 33 at the time) I was at a Jewish event, surrounded by about 100 Jewish people all around my age, and we were celebrating Shabbat. It was one of those groovy, singing and dancing experiences—also a first for me in a Jewish context.

At one point, not sure yet if I was comfortable, I looked around at all the people singing and dancing and generally seeming like they were having a great time. My first thought was typically cynical, and I scoffed to myself: They’re just using this Jewish stuff to feel good about themselves!

In the next moment, I realized: so what? Over many years I had tried a variety of things to help me feel good about myself and none of them had been especially successful. Maybe this was something that could actually work! It seemed cheaper than therapy, so I just gave myself over to the singing and dancing. Of course it wasn’t a magic cure for all my existential angst, but this experience did teach me that Judaism had something more to offer than just some fun holidays and tasty food. At the very least, it was worth exploring.

Little did I know, I had already learned this message more than 20 years earlier when I was preparing for my bat mitzvah. Well, not really learned. Then, as now, one of the things you had to know was the V’ahavta, which I could dutifully recite, even though I had absolutely no idea what it meant or why I needed to say it. Only decades later, around the same time as that fateful Jewish retreat, I learned that it was a command to love God: *b’chol levavcha, uvechol nafshecha, uvechol meodecha;* with all our hearts, with all our souls, with all our “might”. So here it is! A Jewish response to How do you feel?

The 19th century philosopher Franz Rosenzweig described the progression of prayers leading to and from the Shema as a model for our spiritual behavior. The actual words: *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheynu, Adonai Ehad*, are part of a fixed series of blessings in Jewish liturgy. The two preceding it focus on how we experience God in the workings of the natural world, and how we get closer to God as the source of eternal, divine love, through the Torah. After the Shema, we say the v’ahavta—which is a command “you shall love” and then we recite the benefits of choosing a path of good and blessing.

What Rosenzweig says is that it when we say the words of the Shema, we are affirming that we have understood and accepted the first part about loving and experiencing God, but that the process is not complete until we fulfill that command of “you shall love” by turning that godly-inspired love outward.

The v’ahavta begins: you shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. It then goes on to say how to do that: pay attention, teach others, make sure these lessons are part of your daily life. The rabbinic commentators also had something to say about what all your love, heart, soul, and might, actually mean.

Loving, in the biblical context, was more about fidelity and obligation. In terms of the relationship with God, it was part of the promise to not worship idols. Rashi, the medieval rabbinic philosopher, says that this command to love/obey God leaves us a choice. We can fulfill our obligations in love or in fear. In love, we are open and can bring more love. Fear will exhaust you and drive you away from the commitments you have made.

Loving openly is not about romantic love. It simply means that we recognize the potential in everyone to be worthy of our commitment. That doesn’t mean we have to love everyone. It simply means we don’t automatically exclude a category of individuals based on a preconceived notion, or fear.

And while idol worship may not seem like a very contemporary concern, think about all the energy we put into acquiring, maintaining, and using material goods and personal status. Could the amassing of possessions be partially rooted in a fear of human, or divine, connection? We may not build idols and enshrine them, but we do have a tendency to elevate the act of getting more, to extraordinary heights, sometimes at the expense of our other obligations.

*B’chol levavcha-* with all your heart. The rabbis thought about the heart in the same way that we now think about the brain-as the seat of all thought and intention. Loving with all your heart entails channeling those thoughts and intentions into fulfilling our obligations. This might be understood as combining both your head and your heart into feelings and responses.

In this past month, we watched as hurricanes devastated first parts of Texas, and then parts of Florida. In response, we donated money and goods in order to help those affected. In fact, the outpouring of the hearts in this congregation contributed to filling three tractor-trailer-loads of supplies that were brought to Houston. However, this outpouring was only effective because it was paired with the conscious thoughts and intentions of the organizers.

Many of us have seen the pictures of acres of donated goods that were left to waste in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. There was simply too much and no reliable system for handling the deluge of things people sent. I learned from Roger Hoffman, who organized our efforts, that since then, nationwide networks of emergency response volunteers have formed so that when this summer’s hurricanes hit, we were able to tap into that. Our donations went to a church that was already set up to receive and distribute them.

*B’chol nafshecha-*with all your soul. The word nefesh means soul in the mystical, internal sense, but it also is used to describe a living being—a nefesh is a person. So it is about loving with all your soul and all your humanity. There is a rabbinic saying, *bimkom she’ayin anashim, hishtadel l’hiyot ish,*  that I’ll paraphrase as: in a place where you don’t find any decent people, try to be a mensch.

The rabbis talk about the nefesh as being the seat of all emotions, passions, and desires. Loving with all of our souls requires us to both to express and moderate these in order to fulfill our obligations. When the world around us seems to be crazy and lacking compassion, we can be the compassionate ones by remembering that we are each a nefesh. We contain humanity and a soul and we have the choice to turn it towards love and the good, despite what everyone else is doing.

Finally, *B’chol me’odecha*-with all your might-—this is a tricky one. The noun here is the word “me’od” which some of you will recognize as meaning “Very Much” as in, Tov Meod-very good. So what does it mean to feel with all of your “very much-ness”? Rashi offers two interpretations: in the first, he says me’odecha refers to all of your wealth. Referring not to money, but rather to all our possessions. This can imply a couple of things. One, is that we should be generous with all that is ours.

Everything can be employed towards fulfilling our loving obligations. This might also mean that we should be mindful of how we use our money and possessions, so that they are accumulated for the good and not wastefully or thoughtlessly. However, he reminds us, that whether we got them for good or for punishment, we are still obligated to give or respond when we are asked.

In his second interpretation, Rashi understands me’odecha as “all your measures.” This means that our loving should be given with all the strength we have. Fulfill your loving obligations as if your life depended on it. Because, it just may, and if not your life, than someone else’s may. We don’t always get to see the outcome of our actions. If we only respond when we are sure we can see or measure a positive difference, we limit our capacity to love in this way. In fact, it brings us back to the effect of loving in fear. It is too easy to think that our voice, our presence, or donation is too insignificant to make a difference. We can’t know that for certain.

Recently, I was at a meeting with other clergy, talking about yet another ugly incident that had occurred, once again, rooted in bigotry and hate. We were discussing our response and we were discussing our frustration that we seemed to be having one public vigil after another, and things still seemed bad, and we still often got low turnouts, and few people seemed to care. But then we remembered that we don’t always know how far our actions and words reach.

Whether our vigil is about racism, or LGBTQ rights, healthcare, common-sense gun laws, or protecting the dignity of the most vulnerable, our actions show that there are people who care. And if one person is home, scared to go out in public, but sees our actions and is comforted, we have done something of value.

Ultimately, the cure for compassion fatigue is in finding a way to balance how we are feeling so that we can respond in a way that empowers, rather than exhausts us. This requires putting our whole selves into the task. Instead of just reacting, we take the time to research the best response. Instead of getting stuck in the details of a response, we take the time to identify what is moving us to respond. Instead of deflecting our obligations, we take the time to be realistic about what we can and can’t do.

And, most importantly, we remember that compassion and obligation has to extend to ourselves. We read that the world was made by God in six days, and on the seventh day, God didn’t just rest, God stopped. The rabbis teach that this is because after the seventh day, it is incumbent on us to take on the task of creating and perfecting our world. This, as they say, is a marathon, not a sprint. Each of us will need to take a rest at some point, to gather strength, pass the baton onto someone new, get some perspective, and ask ourselves, How do you feel?